

# Libya basks in notoriety

Libya is a curious place, a cross between Bedouin culture, Arab town life and East European socialism. In another way, Libya also resembles Canada. Nearly everyone in this vast desert nation lives within 100 miles of the coast, just as most Canadians crowd up along the U.S. border.

Tripoli, Libya's capital, is a rather depressing and quiet place. Moammar Khadafy's home-grown brand of socialism, called the *jumhuriyah* system, nationalized all commerce. Small stores and shops disappeared, to be replaced by cavernous "people's marts" that were supposed to sell goods without profit. It's a system that would thrill our own NDP and, as usual with such socialist panaceas, has produced shortages, bare shelves, hoarding and long lines of cranky shoppers.

Having turned Libya's commercial life into something closely resembling Poland, Khadafy is now backing off. Small private business is again being allowed, although there is so far almost nothing to buy in the threadbare shops.

I did see some expensive, locally woven fabric, with different patterns romantically called "Authority of the Masses" and the "Line of Death in the Gulf of Sidra." Take that, Pierre Cardin.

Spare parts, imported goods and just about everything is in short supply in Libya. The drop of 50% in oil revenues has deeply hurt this small nation of 3.5 million that used to depend on imported goods and foreign labor to do all menial jobs. Almost all foreign workers have been sent home except for a large contingent of Malians; there are not enough trained Libyans to do many jobs from clearing garbage to fixing elevators.

There is also a brighter side to Khadafy's Arab socialism. Those who cannot afford homes are given houses or apartments by the government — rent free. In Tripoli, I saw large numbers of attractive apartments going up destined for low income groups.

Education and medical care are free. Patients

## ERIC MARGOLIS



who cannot be treated in Libya are sent at government expense to Switzerland or Sweden.

Corruption, the curse of many oil producing nations, is rare in Libya; its oil billions have been used for social welfare — as well as on arms and foreign intrigues.

Khadafy is also a champion of women's rights. His decision to give women military training raised howls of protest from conservative Moslems. To make the point that women were as good as men, Khadafy surrounded himself for a while with female bodyguards. This act was thoroughly misunderstood in the West and held up as yet another example of dementia. If memory serves me correctly, even the *Sun* ran a bit of planted disinformation about "Libyan female suicide squads."

Like most other Moslem nations, Libya is the essence of conservative family life where papa is the boss, mama a saint and even adult "children" are expected to be on their best behavior. Families are big and tend to live together in large compounds.

By nature, Libyans are warm, hospitable, friendly and much given to the infamous Arab IBM System: *Inshallah* (God willing), *Boukhra* (tomorrow, sort of *manana* plus x) and *Malish* (don't worry about it).

As with most other Mideasterners, Libyans have little concept of time, appointments or urgency. Just when they have you thoroughly infuriated and ready to commit mayhem, their charm and kindness melts your anger and reduces you to also saying "*Malish*."

It is hard to imagine these Italians of the Arab world being the murderous terrorists portrayed by Washington. And yet, there have been public hangings on TV and a constant outflow of typically Arab rhetorical bombast about "drinking American blood" and such.

One fact is certain: Libyans are among the world's most dangerous people when they drive. Hardly a car is observed without contusions, abrasions or massive dents. Crossing streets in Tripoli requires commando training.

The Libyans, who pride themselves on being friendly folks — in contrast, as they enjoy pointing out — to the dour, unsmiling Algerians and Moroccans, just can't seem to understand why the rest of the world thinks ill of them. To a man, they seem genuinely hurt. "What, Mr. Eric, us terrorists?" they reply with injured innocence.

But, at the same time, Libyans from all walks of life appear downright thrilled at their role of worldwide celebrities. "We love the limelight" one senior Libyan told me. "Who cares what people say? Libya is a household word."

Heady stuff indeed for a little country not much more populous than Toronto. TV cameras do strange things to people.

### Punch



"I must warn you — I do Esperanto."